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**THE SWISS ARMY: OTHER THAN THE KNIFE
WHAT IS THE POINT?**

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If students of the renowned Swiss military theorist, Antoine-Henri Jomini, equate his strategy of warfare to those of a game of chess, then his native country today can be said to have attained a highly successful “draw” on the world’s gameboard. The history of Switzerland shows that it has been fairly adept as a nation in reassessing the role of its military to fit its national interests. A 1989 referendum prompted by a growing anti-military movement spurred a national debate over the utility of an army for a small neutral nation. For the present at least, the Swiss military seems to have survived this basically economically motivated call for its abolition.

What then is the point of a military for such a small, economically stable, neutral nation? A recent article on the Swiss military¹ cited four basic functions of the army which were first detailed in an apparently controversial book by Jean Ziegler entitled, Switzerland the Awful Truth. The functions are 1) to ensure the defense of Swiss territory against foreign aggression, 2) to preserve internal order, 3) to serve as a cohesive element for the different segments of the Swiss Confederation, and 4) to maintain the military-industrial complex. The primary function of the military addresses the universal national security interest of survival. But will the Swiss military be capable of providing the defensive protection required in an increasingly complex post Cold-War world dominated by nuclear superpower nations? Whether capable or not, is the existence of the Swiss military even necessary given the international climate and the acceptance of Switzerland’s declared neutrality? Should the military revise its strategy of

¹ Scott Olin Schmidt, “Images of an Army: Chaos and the Swiss Military”, Swiss Government Home Page, www-scf.usc.edu/~sschmidt/pauline.html

defensive mobility to deal with the new world order and accept an active role in multilateral efforts to manage armed conflicts? Following is a review and analysis using the National War College Framework for Military Strategy vis-à-vis the contemporary Swiss military

Political Objectives

The Swiss political objectives are clear and on the surface quite simple to maintain its declared neutrality and to protect the independence of the nation from foreign aggression. The Swiss Confederation first declared its policy of neutrality in 1674 and has, over the past three hundred plus years, on several occasions had to struggle to maintain its impartial role in world affairs while its neighbors went to war. At the commencement of each of the two world wars, Switzerland issued a declaration of neutrality but the government had to work hard to keep the reaction of its French and German oriented populations from causing the nation to become embroiled in the hostilities surrounding the country. The government also had to try to maintain its commerce so that its economy would not collapse. The inherent difficulty of maintaining an independent, neutral commercial policy while sandwiched between two belligerent nations or engulfed by one nation set on aggressive expansionism still shows in the consequences, more than fifty years after World War II, of public outcry over Swiss banks hoarding Holocaust victims' assets and the Nazi money trail.

The Swiss government is composed of three branches: a bicameral parliament, the judiciary, and a seven-member executive council of ministers (the Federal Council) which selects a chief of state on an annual rotating basis. The

government is one of the most responsive to public will and the people are involved in deciding a wide latitude of policy by voting on matters as divergent as whether to join the European Union to whether stores can remain open an additional hour. Because of this strongly representative aspect of Swiss governance, it appears that the “paradoxical trinity” which Karl von Clausewitz posed to describe the nature of war is somewhat skewed in Switzerland—the people and the government act as one. Rather, the government does not act until the people decide the course. Similarly, it is difficult to measure the distance between the military commander and the army and the government. In peacetime, the army is headed by the minister in charge of the Military Department, and in the event of a mobilization, a commander-in-chief is selected to lead the army. There have only been four commanders-in-chief named in Swiss history (none since 1939) and the Swiss army has not been involved in external conflict in this century. It is, therefore, highly unlikely that the military would serve as an independent organ in the event of another mobilization. There goes the trinity.

Military Objectives

Switzerland's military has little in the way of traditional external threats to be concerned with and maintains no offensive strategy. “Bordered on three sides by NATO nations, Switzerland has a natural systemic defense mechanism. As long as these countries see Switzerland as, ‘nos amis helvetes,’ there would be no threat of direct attack. Even in the unthinkable threat of nuclear war, Switzerland, due to her small size and close proximity to France, Germany and

Italy would be theoretically protected by a 'nuclear umbrella' Any ground invasion of Switzerland would have to go through the territory of a NATO member However, in order to maintain relations with her neighbors, and the rest of the world, the Swiss are inclined not to take any external military action whatsoever "2

The center of gravity for Switzerland is dependent on the type of war in which it becomes engaged In the event of a traditional act of aggression across its borders, the center of gravity would be the will of its people Unfortunately for the aggressor, the strong Swiss commitment to independence, which is the basis for its political neutrality, makes their center of gravity also their strongest point of defense It is much more likely that Switzerland could become the target of a less direct terrorist act or could be drawn into an international conflict through some unintentional provocation by Swiss trade or economic policy In such an event, the force of the Swiss military would be nullified Although its neutrality stance prevents Switzerland from having declared allies, the world opinion should the Swiss come under such indirect attack would, no doubt, cause its neighbors and other Western countries to come to its defense in any way possible

Military Capabilities and Vulnerabilities

Switzerland spends 3.6 percent of its gross national product on its defense program—an amount comparable to the spending of other Western nations ³

² Scott Schmidt, "The Determination of Swiss Foreign Policy," Swiss Government Home Page, www-scfc.usc.edu/~sschmidt/dfpdraft.html

³ Schmidt, "Images of an Army", 2

While there is no standing army, the military is engrained in Swiss life through the conscription of all able-bodied adult males who must participate in annual training exercises and are available in the event of a general mobilization. Several Swiss highways are easily converted to airstrips in the event of a mobilization and large underground structures secreted in mountains are believed to house hangars for Swiss military aircraft. From this investment in resources and manpower, the Swiss expect that their military readiness will prevent the nation from being occupied. As a neutral nation, the Swiss rely heavily on their military preparedness to serve as a deterrent. Along with a 1993 purchase of 34 F/A-18 aircraft, the Swiss were able to convince the United States, through the active participation of the U.S. Ambassador, to allow them to have rights to the AMRAAM missile before these were even acquired by NATO allies.⁴

With all of these resources, however, the Swiss are not deluding themselves into thinking that they could pose a significant threat to any superpower intent on occupying their small nation. Their military interest is limited. The Swiss simply want to be able to maintain their neutrality and use their well-integrated military structure to bolster a feeling among their population that the nation is secure.

Strategic Concept

Despite its consistently neutral political and military stance, the Swiss strategic concept has had to evolve in line with the nature of the conflict bearing the potential to engulf the nation. During the World Wars, the Swiss strategic

⁴ Scott Olin Schmidt, "An Oral History Study of American Diplomats in Bern, Switzerland", Swiss

concept focused on a static defense with mobile reserves used as a back up in the event that an enemy broke through the first line of defense "An infantry army clinging stubbornly to every inch of Swiss territory was the basic rule"⁵ In response to what it perceived as the threat of "tactical" atomic weapons and other technological advances in warfare (predominantly in air power), the Swiss Federal Council reorganized the national defense strategy in 1960 to focus on increasing and maintaining mechanized mobility as a way to ensure national security The 1960 innovations were also necessary to provide for greater use of air power and a Swiss air corps was born from this reorganization "Another reason for reorganization for mobility was to provide for a military organization capable of using its own 'tactical' weapons in the future"⁶ While there is little possibility that the Swiss will or want to acquire tactical nuclear weapons, their desire for greater air power demonstrates that, despite their neutrality stance, they are just as likely as any nation to develop an offensive strategy if necessary

The 1989 movement to abolish the Swiss military was based on an economic assessment of the costs of operating such a high-maintenance national defense when the apparent external threats are so low But are the threats really low or will they simply in come in new guises? In response to Iraqi aggression into Kuwait, Switzerland supported economic sanctions against Iraq and the freezing of Iraqi assets in Swiss banks These actions were taken despite the fact that Switzerland is not a member of the United Nations and only

Government Home Page, www-scf.usc.edu/~sschmidt/pdaoralh.html

⁵ George Arthur Coddington, Jr., The Federal Government of Switzerland (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1961), 141

⁶ Ibid., 144

maintains non-voting observer status in that organization. Feeling pressed to support an international effort to contain outrageous acts of aggression, Switzerland could jeopardize its longstanding neutrality and cause itself to be drawn more deeply into world conflicts than intended. If the Persian Gulf war is an example of the extent of the egregious activity which would be required for Switzerland to take affirmative action in a world conflict, then it appears that only the actions of "rogue nations" would compel Swiss involvement. As such, the nation could then become the target of reprisals in the form of terrorist acts against Swiss interests abroad. The Swiss airline, Swiss multinational companies and Swiss citizens would then look to the government for protection. The utility of the army would be nil under those circumstances.

Potential Results

The costs for maintaining a military which is prepared to meet a traditional threat of external force that will, in all probability, never appear, seems to be no more than the Swiss people are prepared to pay. With their highly responsive government, the Swiss people have reviewed the necessity of their army in the post-Cold War era and reaffirmed its existence. The military clearly serves other purposes in Switzerland than simply to ensure territorial defense and those other purposes are sufficiently valuable to the Swiss people for them to continue the financial and social burden of maintaining a modern military.

The most serious risks for the nation would be from a failure to make a pragmatic reassessment of the national security threats which Switzerland could face in the future and to realign their military structure to meet these potential

problems. History has shown that a nation's historical experience with war heavily influences its level of preparedness and outlook on its role in any potential new conflict. In Switzerland's case, however, a traditional war akin to the events of World War I and II is inconceivable. In any event, it was not the Swiss military that kept it from becoming embroiled in those conflicts, it was the belligerent nations' recognition of Swiss neutrality.

A Neutral Army and the Art of War Theorists

Jomini would have been proud of his birth nation as it has set the highest example to which he referred in his discussion of national wars. In calling for a structure for conflict between those solely involving "permanent armies" and those involving the entire population rising up against an invading force, he managed to predict the military future of his homeland. "Will it not be sufficient, for the efficient defense of the country, to organize a militia which, uniformed and called by their governments into service, would regulate the part the people should take in the war."⁷ While he might have preferred "the good old times" when conflicts were limited to professional armies, he would certainly have admired the Swiss model of today as a logical and efficient method of defense.

It appears that the remainder of Jomini's theories on warfare are inapplicable to modern Switzerland. In reality, however, although Switzerland views itself basically as a non-participant in war or strictly defensive in character, in the event of a violation of its territory, it would no doubt also attempt to implement some of the Baron's advice on offensive warfare to protect its

territory—albeit in a very limited sphere. Fierce Swiss independence and a high level of preparedness in the military might prompt the Swiss to engage in an aggressive defense with offensive forays should its territory be invaded—at least, until sympathetic nations could come to its defense. Similarly, as the world progresses towards even greater globalization and Switzerland is compelled to reexamine its neutrality stance with respect to international organizations, cooperative agreements and defensive security pacts, it could conceivably become more engaged in joint uses of military force to ensure world order. The interrelationship of the Swiss economy with other world economies and the need to protect its role in international commerce has already begun to draw the nation into other global efforts such as the sanctions effort involving Iraq. Swiss participation in multi-force efforts does not seem a distant possibility.

Swiss military strategy is fundamentally the embodiment of a Sun Tzu maxim: “If the enemy is strong and I am weak, I temporarily withdraw and do not engage.”⁸ The Swiss have realized this point since the origins of their confederation in the 13th century through a loose alliance among sovereign states for collective security. It is the seminal basis for Swiss political and military neutrality. The Swiss will not engage unless forced to do so.

The Swiss Grand Strategy works. Switzerland is what B. H. Liddell Hart would view as a “conservative state” interested in maintaining its territory and the

⁷ Antoine-Henri Jomini, The Art of War, trans. G. H. Mendell and W. P. Craighill (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott and Co., 1862, rpt. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press), p. 30.

⁸ Sun Tzu, The Art of War, trans. Samuel B. Griffith (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 80.

status quo⁹ To do so, the Swiss have managed to attain and guard the universal recognition of their policy of neutrality and, thereby, have successfully conserved the strength of the nation from costly military engagements They need now only to continue their periodic reevaluation of the effectiveness of their national security through the use of the military and to devise uses for their armed forces which could combat the types of threats likely to challenge their nation in the complex post Cold-War world

⁹ B H Liddell Hart, Strategy, 2nd Rev ed (New York, NY Penguin Books, 1991), p 355